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William Casey, Secret Warrior

The William Casey era at Central Intelligence ended for personal reasons everyone regrets. But the timing, while he didn't choose it, spared him an appointed battle with the congressional oversight committees that might well have been his longest and last. When he fell ill in December, Congress was just beginning to dissect the Iran-contra affair; and the half of Casey's involvement had not been told, least of all by him. More surely will be.

Casey's stewardship at the CIA was productive by the standards of bureaucratic enhancement. He increased the budget and the personnel. And with Ronald Reagan's blessing, the White House checkrein gave way to a long and elastic leash. The agency, meaning essentially its operations or "dirty tricks" side, regained some freedom from what Casey and other apostles of unfettered secret war-making saw as pussyfooting restrictions. Casey was of the view that "most of the highly publicized charges made against the CIA in the '70s turned out to be false." He acted accordingly.

He had a point of sorts. To a degree, the agency had been unfairly pummeled for illegal initiatives that were the result of presidential orders. Some resumption of trust was in order, and healthy.

But Casey exaggerated the agency's innocence as much as savage critics exaggerated its roguishness. This reverse mirror image of the critics' view, turning the Church and Pike committee verdicts upside down, was a recipe for trouble. Trouble followed—lots of it.

With the president's encouragement, Casey treated the congressional oversight committees, charged with monitoring secret activities, as nuisances to be baffled. His biggest job of obfuscation, before Iran, was the concealment of CIA mining of Nicaragua's harbors, a part of the Reagan Casey crusade against the Sandinista government.

When the leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Barry Goldwater and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, rebelled against this high-handedness, Casey claimed that they had been "briefed" on the mining operation. Moynihan found one vague reference to the mining in a 64-page briefing transcript. This, it seemed, was "briefing a la Casey. Such encounters ignited a sort of low-level guerrilla struggle between the director of Central Intelligence and his Capitol Hill overseers. Casey often capitulated to the overseers' view, but the capitulations were tactical.

From its inception, the contra movement has been Casey's pet project. The contras were at first represented to the oversight committees as a small "strike force" to interdict Nicaraguan arms shipments to El Salvador. Such prevarication aroused congressional distrust and restrictions, which were in turn airily ignored.

But set aside as secondary, or in any case elusive, the tangled issues of legality—for instance, the bizarre practice of legalizing congressional forbidden acts with secret presidential "findings." Such shenanigans clearly twisted, if they did not pervert, legislative intent. But they were less important than allowing unchecked secret operations to wag the dog of national policy, in Central America and elsewhere.

Casey has been the walking embodiment of these past six years of one side of a fundamental dilemma that has haunted the CIA for all 40 years of its history: if secret operations are useful in protecting the national security, how do you ensure that those who undertake them remain accountable?

Whatever his virtues may be, William Casey treated congressional concern on this score as if it were the negligible whim of liberal wimps, not a serious issue. He took an unreconstructed view: secret wars were executive-branch business. It was a nostalgic throwback to a past. Casey stood for the view (and he was far from alone in it) that when the secret war-making capacity clashed with accountability, so much the worse for accountability.

But Congress, even at its most conservative, has given unalterable notice that the Casey view is not acceptable. No doubt Casey did many things right, but he fought an ill-advised and arrogant rear-guard action against accountability. He renewed a fight the secret warriors had already lost, and should have.